

Jessica Mathews

Forging Consensus On Climate Change

Most international institutions cause comment these days when they don't work. But one global panel has become the center of a flaming controversy because it is working too well.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is a major innovation. Its aim is to develop a regularly updated, global scientific consensus—itsself unprecedented—and to link that advancing understanding to governmental response. Almost without noticing, governments created an institution that practically forces them to follow the science and to change their views as it changes. National interests aren't by any means absent, but to a degree that's unusual when the stakes are so high they have been forced to take a back seat to the facts. The usual process of international negotiations is subtly reversed: Discussions begin with what countries can agree on.

Though the panel's process is cumbersome, it works. Last year, 120 governments gulped and agreed that human-caused climate change appears to be underway. This was an enormous step that shifts the center of attention from whether mankind is disrupting the climate to what to do about it.

Last month came the response. With the first conference of treaty parties just weeks ahead, a distinguished scientist, Frederick R. Seitz, attacked the IPCC at its core. A former president of both the American Physical Society and the National Academy of Sciences, Seitz chairs a Washington-based group whose work has focused on making the technical case for President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative and questioning the scientific basis for concern about global warming.

In a piece in the Wall Street Journal, Seitz charged that the chapter in the IPCC report on which the central finding was based "is not what it appears to be. . . . I have never witnessed a more disturbing corruption of the peer-review process." The effect of changes made after scientists "accepted what they thought was the final peer-reviewed version" is to "deceive policy makers" into believing that the evidence of human-induced change is stronger than it is. If the IPCC can't follow procedures, he concludes "it would be best to abandon [it]."

After that, others were off and running. The Global Climate Coalition, an organization of coal, oil and utility interests, called this a case of "scientific cleansing." Is the report "just another example of scientific sensationalism," wondered the Cato Institute, one that has been "heavily and disingenuously edited by political activists."

As it turns out, none of Seitz's charges is correct. The draft chapter was finalized in response to comments received not in violation of the IPCC's rules but as those rules require. The changes were made by the same scientists who wrote the final draft and the several versions that preceded it. There was no mysterious outside force. Having already invested hundreds of hours (as volunteers) in the task, the chapter's authors were still guided by the same goal, namely, to protect their scientific reputations. The changes reduce redundancy in the discussion of uncertainties and may, in some people's judgment, alter the chapter's tone. They do not in the slightest degree change its scientific content or bottom line.

The whole episode reduces to a misunderstanding of what the words "final draft" mean (not final version) and from the scheduling of two crucial meetings two weeks apart when the rules require that materials be circulated six weeks in advance. This was at worst a technicality, however, since the purpose of the final gathering was not to discuss the background chapters. That task had been assigned to the earlier working groups.

Seitz owes the IPCC and the chapter's authors an apology, preferably one as public as his initial charges. Once that happens the rest of the controversy will evaporate.

For its part, the IPCC needs to review its procedures, particularly at the crucial step where science and policy meet, where there is little established practice to go by. To protect itself in cases where government actions may affect huge economic interests, the IPCC has to be purer than Caesar's wife on process.

It should bend over backward, too, to see that the fossil fuel industry's concerns are met. In the long run, the consensus among countries must be extended to include business and environmental groups. Businesses will naturally defend their own interests, but they are not immune to reason. The more they are engaged in the scientific and policy analysis now, the greater the eventual payoff will be. They should be welcomed, even wooed, into the IPCC's work, but they must play by the same rules, challenging peer-reviewed science with peer-reviewed science, not self-published or unpublished material.

Think of the difference if such a process had guided, say, the debate about smoking and health, and the implications of this model for the growing list of global challenges, from depleted fisheries to spreading corruption (the experts involved need not be scientists). There is more at stake here than just a sensible and effective response to global warming.

The writer is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.